Criminal Justice Connections
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Agency News

Phone phishing attempt prompts nationwide fraud warning

On July 10, Texas Department of Criminal Justice Inspector General Bruce Toney learned that officials in our agency were receiving multiple phone calls from private citizens seeking to confirm that an automated phone call they had received actually came from TDCJ's Office of the Inspector General, as claimed in the prerecorded message. The message also said the recipient's Social Security number had been flagged for criminal fraud and urged them to call a phone number with an Austin area code.

With 24 hours, TDCJ and OIG began to receive similar confirmation-seeking calls from all over the United States. It was also discovered that whoever was making the calls knew the recipient's name, home address and Social Security number, and those who called the provided number were asked to leave a recorded message which included personal, confidential information. Fortunately, the majority of those called did not provide information or funds, but instead chose to validate the call by contacting TDCJ.

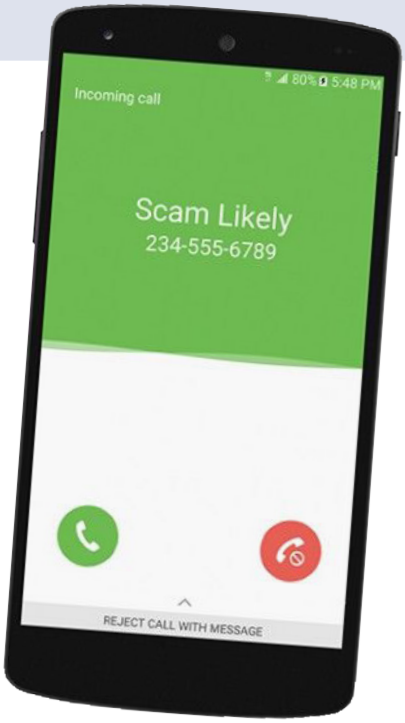
Phishing is a malicious attempt to obtain money or sensitive information using an electronic communication which seems to come from a trustworthy source. While phishing attacks are commonly made using a fake website or pop-up screen, some arrive as a text message or a phone call asking potential victims to call a number or go to a website where they are prompted to send money or divulge confidential information.

More sophisticated vishing (voice phishing) efforts, such as this one, use a fake caller ID to give the appearance that calls come from a trusted organization. An OIG investigation quickly determined that the phone number provided by the caller was internet-based but designed to appear as if it came from the Austin area code, a tactic used by illicit call center operations which allows them to pose as a trusted organization or government body. The fake Austin phone number, seemingly based in the state capital, was used by this criminal enterprise in an attempt to lend more credibility to their scheme.

Realizing the wide-ranging implications of this scheme, Inspector General Toney immediately initiated a security response to mitigate public risk. The Federal Communications Commission and the Federal Trade Commission were informed of the fraudulent calls and the associated phone number, and the FTC initiated investigations through their federal agency task force.

Agency employees were notified through internal communication channels and TDCJ's Public Information office issued alerts through news and social media outlets. An alert bulletin was immediately posted on the agency's website to warn the public and TDCJ staff members of the scam.

Always keep in mind that your personal information could become available to malicious individuals and organizations. If you



receive a call which asks for your personal identifying information or that directs you to provide funds using gift cards, Western Union, PayPal or any other source, view that call with suspicion and independently verify the source of the request to make sure of the caller's true identity.

TDCJ's Office of the Inspector General is dedicated to detecting, investigating and prosecuting reports of waste, fraud and abuse of state resources within the agency. Fraud, identity theft and unfair business practice complaints can be filed online with the Federal Trade Commission. ▲